

2/6/23

The students had gathered in the rabbi's study as usual for the Saturday afternoon discussion of the week's Torah portion. The rabbi quickly entered and, as he was sitting down, the students automatically began to try to squeeze another inch or two closer to the black-dressed figure at the head of the table. Finally, he began reading from the text with a rhythmic lifting and falling of his voice.

"and Adonai spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai..." At this point, the rabbi broke off his reading and removed his dark glasses. Looking over his students' heads, he began his commentary with the same rise and fall of tone which he used in reading the text.

"So, what is meant by the word 'in the desert? Are we at liberty to understand In the desert in a literal sense and let it go at that, or is there something hidden in the word which we need to explore?" He paused, as if wondering whether to give the answer, then continued. "You see our understanding of the word In the desert is like any experience we may have. Some things about the experience are very obvious, while there are others which are not so obvious. The problem is that often we are just satisfied with the most obvious meanings rather than search for deeper ones. In our world, many things are not so obvious; we have many doubts. We have these doubts because we yearn for something more, something more satisfying than the obvious. We grope, and delve, searching for something.

When we look long at words such as "In the desert" or any experience, we can begin to see new powerful meanings. Was it not our sages who said that each word in the Torah is like a rock which can be broken up into many valuable pieces? If our sages held that the meanings of the Bible were infinite, why not make the same application to life's experiences?

Take for example, the simple act of fixing a mezuzah on our doors. While it appears to be the simplest of ritual observances, it can have an infinite amount of powerful meaning for us. It might help us to identify with our people and its history. Or it may remind us that we cherish certain values and ethics in our homes. Or it may make us realize how fortunate we are just to have a home. Whatever new meaning we find by fixing our mezuzah on our door, we find them because the simple act is not enough. We want something more.

But in order to find these new meanings, we must be seekers. Here, an analogy will help clarify this. We must be like a lover who circles the palace in which he presumes his beloved is held captive. He can find no entrance or

window from which he could rescue her, but he keeps circling, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

Well, we are the lovers. And Bamedbar the Book of Numbers is the castle. And deeper truth is our love. This evening I would like to tell you what I found while circling the palace. Let me read the first verse of the Book of Numbers in Hebrew

The literal meaning is, "and Adonai spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai." But the word Bmedbar also contains the root D.B.R. which means "speaking". If we use the second meaning of the word, we learn that God addressed Moses through the medium of speech. This leads us to the discovery that God's message to our people was communicated by speaking, and speaking, of course, implies hearing. The Hebrew ways of apprehending truth is based on the acoustical sense, "Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God and Adonai is One."

But the Hebrew way does not limit itself only to hearing. The Torah states that in the wilderness of Sinai "all the people saw the voices." This phrase, "saw the voices", is not an accident nor does it speak of a miracle. It points to another way of apprehending the truth. The need to see what is heard and hear what is seen. I am using the interpretation of the word Bamedbr as an illustration of how to approach the Bible where every word is fraught with a variety of meanings. In the wilderness of Sinai, the veil was broken, revealing the many ways by which we can apprehend the truth. One who searches for the truth must use a variety of ways to obtain it. We should not be willing to accept and believe in ideas just because they are beautiful. We must find criteria – something that will test our conclusions.

I am assuming several things here. First, that we are living in a world where there are wild catastrophes and life just does not move along on a costumed path. And secondly, at times we feel incompetent to cope with the troubles and evils that we encounter. These conditions bring us back to the word "Bmedbar" and the desert ordeal of our ancestors. What grounds are there for supposing that our state of affairs has changed drastically from that of our ancestors? Were our ancestors not searching for something that would supply a new sense of confidence and security? They chose to rely on a permanent structure with a fixed revelation of absolute, unchanging Being and Truth. That revelation became the sole ground of assurance and support amid the difficulties of life. In contrast to such a choice of a permanent structure, we have taken other paths. But we too search for a meaningful and purposeful existence.

Consider for a moment the place occupied in popular thought by the search for THE meaning of life and THE purpose of the universe. Sometimes, people, looking for a single purpose and a single end, frame ideas according to their private desires and traditions. Children do this in regard to their belief about the word of "God." Because their minds seem to gravitate toward orderliness, they invent intricate theories which make the known facts of their world fit neatly together into their definition of the word "God." But on the other hand, there are also people who may find no single unity. Those people may give up in despair and conclude that there is no genuine meaning or value in any of life's episodes.

There is no reason why we have to decide between no meaning at all and one single, all-embracing meaning. Just as "Bamedbar" can have many meanings and values, so can life's experiences. Each situation offers its own challenges to thought and endeavor and presents its own potential value.

I think it is this idea of a plurality of interconnected meanings and purposes which should replace that of the single meaning and the single purpose. We all know that the most obvious meaning may sometimes be enough. For instance, a couple going through a divorce know the obvious: they don't get along. What they need to search for is the deeper reasons for their falling out of love. This discovery might help them solve their immediate problems, or at least it might help them grow so that their new future alone may be better.

We can find much happiness and joy by endeavoring to discover in each changing situation of experience its own full and unique personal meaning. And this happiness is not just limited to when life goes on smoothly and undisturbed. It is possible even in the midst of chaos and evil. For even when tragedy befalls us, the very experience of tragedy can lead us to discover new meaning and value in our own lives.

All of us have been, or will sometime be, confronted with a deep personal suffering. Some of us will choose to make sense out of our sufferings by assuming we deserve what we get, that somehow our misfortune is punishment for our misdeeds. But this attitude creates guilt even when there is no basis for our guilt. What we need to do then is to look at our tragedies differently. We need to quit looking for reasons why the event happened and begin to look for values that we can derive from it. Maybe we might conclude that suffering comes to ennoble us, or to expand our horizons. Or maybe we might realize that evil is a part of the world and randomly strikes everyone at sometime. But whatever value we find that value will help us grow. It will help us meet the challenges of the future.

The rabbi closed his book and rested his head in his hands. One member of the group quickly thanked him for the "lesson", and the rabbi lowered his eyes. "Your ears have opened my mouth for a long time, but every teacher knows the ears can close a mouth. Actually, in the search for living waters in our desert, a teacher is only a drill, an instrument, the water must be buried under the sands or it will never be found."